



## Developing Winning Proposals

In our virtual world, the proposal takes on an important role because we may have only one chance to make a good impression and we may never get the opportunity to meet face-to-face with our prospect. This article aims to help you develop winning proposals by knowing where to start; how to make the most of your time; what to include and what to leave out; and how to present your information with clarity.

### Step One: Deciding to Respond (or Not)

The first step in responding to an RFP is to decide whether or not to respond. You'll be able to arrive at a decision by asking yourself these questions:

- Is this prospect in your niche market?
- Does this type of work interest you and fit in your schedule?
- Have you done this type of work before?
- Can you demonstrate that you can provide a solution to this challenge?
- Do you already have a relationship with this prospect?
- Was this RFP the result of a referral?

If you still can't decide, or you're sitting on the fence, maybe you need more information. Now may be a good time to ask the prospect some in-depth questions:

- Why are you issuing this RFP now?
- What has changed in your business that you need this type of support?
- What is and is not working for you?
- What factors will you use to help you make a decision?

People buy from people they know, trust or recognize. In other words, you've got a greater chance of success if you are the incumbent, or someone the prospect trusts has referred you. Secondly, usually two or three factors will be key for making a decision; by knowing what those factors are, you can effectively position your response. Finally, buyers are looking for return on investment, so providing a customized solution with measurable results will be important for success.

### Step Two: Developing Prospect-centred Proposals

Proposals are sales documents and should clearly indicate that you understand the prospect's need. They should provide a solution, present reasons why you're the best choice and convince your prospect that your solution is the best solution. Your proposal should not be an information dump, or a copy of your resume.

Draft a succinct description of what the prospect's challenge is and what solution you will provide. It will help you stay focused on their need and your solution. Depending on the magnitude of the prospect's request, you may consider asking for help in developing your proposal, or teaming up with other's to deliver on the challenge. There is strength in numbers and securing the help of others may lead to success for you and your future client.

### Step Three: Preparing your Proposal

Armed with in-depth information and clarity on the solution you will provide, it's time to begin developing your response. An outline can be very helpful to make effective use of your time.

When developing your outline, brainstorm and think about logical and creative ways to present your solution. Gather additional resources and indicate where you will include them in your response. If you have client testimonials, make sure they are highly visible in your proposal.

A work plan, presented in a table format, is an effective visual to use because most prospects will want to know how the project will take shape. Let's assume you've been asked to develop a customized mail merge. A sample work plan is below:

Task/Step	When	Who	Professional Fees	Result
1. Create prospect database	May 1, 2006	Virtual assistant	\$1,000	Database searchable by region, type, etc.
2. Draft marketing letters	May 15, 2006	Virtual assistant	\$500	Letter templates (5) indicating customized fields
3. Approve client letters	May 25, 2006	Client XYZ	NA	Final marketing letter templates

Create the first draft of your proposal and give yourself ample time to revise and edit. Many good writers spend a significant amount of time in the re-writing phase – as high as 40%! Use sidebars, highlighting, tables and graphs to present important or complex information.

Following your editing phase, secure the help of someone you trust and who is familiar with your industry, but hasn't been involved in the development of this proposal. Ask them to review your document and provide feedback on content and presentation – a fresh set of eyes will see things you may not. Finally, deliver your proposal before the deadline. It will demonstrate many things to the client, not the least of which is that you can manage your time.

### Step Four: Following Up

Depending on how you deliver your proposal, follow up immediately, or shortly after. Offer to provide the prospect with additional information and answer questions. Thank them for considering you. Probably the most important step in this phase is to ask for information on next steps – how and when will they decide on awarding this contract. Having this information gives you a reason to contact them again and stay top-of-mind. Good luck!

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